Discussion Note

An Evaluation of Second Language Acquisition in Postmodern Era

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On looking back the history of second language learning (SLA), one can clearly see the shift beginning from structural approaches to cognitive, naturalist, socio-cultural, communicative approaches, then contextualized and much later ecological ones. Although each approach comes out by criticizing the previous one/ones in different fields, they are just like a complement of each other in terms of SLA. To illustrate, cognitivists criticizes structuralism in that structural linguists see the language as only a linear, systematic system in which teaching takes place in forming habits through pre-selected, pre-sequenced linguistic forms. What cognitive linguists believe that learning a language cannot be limited to what is taught as linguistic forms since learners can create infinite number of sentences using finite rules of grammar and they add there should be something which helps learners to use the second language (L2) cognitively. It is sure that language cannot be regarded without linguistic forms and may need explicit explanation with a continual and conscious attention until it becomes automatic as structural linguists have suggested. In addition, being able to understand mental procedure happening during language learning provides learners to become more aware of their own learning process and benefit from whenever it is needed as cognitivists have mentioned. Just like in this example, the new perspective meets the deficit of the previous one. By the time SLA reaches its postmodern era, each forthcoming approach, technique, method, or procedure brings a new look to language itself, to language learning, and to second language learning via complementing a part which has not been considered before. In this case, it is certain that we can expect the newest approach is the most complex and the most inclusive of all. Despite the fact that postmodernism brings a broader viewpoint to SLA, there are some assumptions which are still fresh to debate. This paper aims to explain the significance of individual variability in L2 as a central construct and whether the experiences in physical and social world support language learning or not.

Keywords: ecological perspective, individual differences

There is a saying of Mevlana; "However much you try to explain something, the audience gets the points you explain as much as he/she can understand". When we think teaching and learning process from this perspective, we can observe that the efforts of teachers are sometimes inefficacious. As a teacher, I myself witness numerous conversations among teachers which state that they do theirbest and teach every relevant subject during the lesson but the results are not always

rewarding. The teachers usually claim that the failure of language learning belongs to students. Then, some questions arise on our minds: all variables such as the coursebook, the activities, the teacher, the amount of time are the same, and then what hinders students learning? This question itself is the answer. To what extent is it true that putting all variables are the same although each individual is totally different from one another? To illustrate, a lot of people like growing flowers; plant some and try to do their best for those flowers in good purposes. Nevertheless, not everyone is successful on it. A gardener, on the other hand, knows the amount of the water, the amount of sunshine, air, the type of fertilizer to be used and the best place for each type of flower. Then, the result is surely satisfactory. Similarly, a teacher must be just like a gardener. He/she needs to know the needs of each learner, which is quite a difficult job. Postmodernism offers us some new viewpoints for SLA pedagogy in terms of individual differences and experiences of learners. Kumaravadivelu (2008) lists three pedagogic parameters which are particularity, practicality and possibility about postmodern pedagogy of SLA. The first one suggests that postmethod pedagogy should be sensitive to a particular group of teachers and learners with a particular set of aims in a particular context of a particular society. Then, it offers teachers to reflect on the theories they follow and the practice in their real teaching environment by considering all new possibilities in teaching environment.

In relation to individual variability, we can say that the first studies of individual differences date back to the end of nineteenth century. Yet, every new discover leads new unknowns in the field and motivate researchers to study more on this subject since it is almost impossible to understand an individual totally. Dörnyei (2008) defines individual differences as 'anything that marks a person as a distinct and unique human being'. The early studies of individual differences were about language aptitude and language motivation, then the list has been filled with self-efficacy, self-esteem, identity, and other factors including individual differences. In spite of various studies done on individual differences to be able to overcome any difficulties in learning process, they are not good enough to overcome some problems with the issue. Williams and Burden (1997, p. 95) summarizes those problematic parts of individual differences studies as in the following:

- They mostly dealt with measuring, labeling and grouping people.
- They put them into categories in terms of their similarities.
- The results could not support us to help learners to become effective in learning.

Although measuring, grouping or labeling learners with dichotomies like field-dependent or field-independent can provide us to know how learner tend to learn better, they do not seem good enough to understand individuals effectively. As an alternative approach, Williams and Burden (1997) prefer to find out how learners construct their own personal views or meaning from the world around them so as to go about making sense of their learning. One of their suggestions about finding out the answers of these questions is self-concept. Purkey and Novak (in Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 97) define self as 'the totality of a complex and dynamic system of learned beliefs which each individual holds to be true about his or her personal existence'. Likewise, Mercer (2011) defines self as 'what one believes to be true about oneself'. Each individual has his / her own self-beliefs and these both affect their decision about present situation, and also

evaluating their past experiences and their aims for the future. Dörnyei (as cited in Mercer and Williams, 2014, p. 10) defines perception of an individual's present time as 'self-concept' while he identifies his/her future expectations as 'possible selves'.

Individuals construct a view of world and later they improve their awareness of themselves as individuals in a social context. Constructivist theory tells us this process of making their construct depends on each individual's experiences within the physical and social world. That indicates the significance of context, too. Chaos or complexity theory has essential implications which help us to comprehend the importance of individual variability and experiences of ea ch individual. The theory implies that we cannot predict what is going to be in the class however much we have planned the lessons before, for it is impossible to know the effects of each individual's experiences for the teaching and learning process. The theory also reminds us any outcome that we have in the lesson may result from plenty of causes and reasons in learning. Additionally, it states that a small change may have huge consequences and this result can occur at any time in any place.

In the light of these doctrines of the theories, we can broaden our perspectives to SLA and have some implications for our teaching. Firstly, we now know that individuals construct their own learning by depending on their own experiences. It is similar to the situation of a person who has just eaten a well-sugared dessert. He/she cannot taste any other drink or food just after the dessert. That is to say, a teacher's effort may be insufficient for all the students since what they bring to the classroom are different in order to get the points taught to them. Therefore, teachers should have opinions about what their learners see important and meaningful to be able to help them in their learning. Secondly, learners learn in the way that they feel better in understanding the topic. They have their personal attributes, learning strategies and their own preferences in learning. Teachers should be aware that each individual go further in his/her particular way. Therefore, they should have a variety of language learning activities for various learning styles, preferences and attributes. They also help learners to find out their strength and weaknesses in order to improve their self-concept. Thirdly, Kumaravadivelu (2008) suggest that a postmethod teacher's responsibilities should include developing a reflective approach to his/her teaching, analyzing and evaluating his/her own teaching acts, and promoting changes in class and observing the outcomes of these changes so that they can motivate the learners to have a reflective approach for their learning, as well. In that way, learners can raise their awareness about themselves. They can learn how to benefit from their personal experiences, choices, preferences and priorities for improving their learning. This may contribute to their learning process in a positive way. Finally, it would be useful to mention about context since being an individual being and having experiences from physical and social world occurs in particular contexts. Bakhtin (as cited in Mercer and Williams, 2014, p. 63) underlines that 'language is not a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking, but it is situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings'. He thinks that language learners use the language to express their own meanings. Based on these issues, we can conclude that teachers should create opportunities in which learners can express themselves in classrooms. If a stress-free environment where the learners feel themselves in secure and where they can find different options appropriate to their preferences, their use of L2-

which is the ultimate purpose in language classrooms- could be achieved more easily.

Consequently, learning language in the classroom is a complex process influenced by multiple factors which we cannot reduce to a single linear relationship. The most conspicuous variable in that complex process is the individual learner. Every individual is a totally different person just like an ice-berg which we can see only the surface of it from a far distance, but we can understand it has much more to discover when we approach near it. We, as teachers, need to be near to the learners who have numerous different experiences that facilitate their language learning process from their physical and social world. We should improve our perspectives to be able to understand that complex process so that we can help the learners better as a mediator in our classrooms.

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